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## Teaching compulsory and optional subjects in contemporary schools

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### Abstract

The paper sets out to analyse the status of the modern foreign language as a compulsory National Curriculum subject taught at primary level in Romanian and English contemporary schools. Another central issue is that of adaptation to and assimilation of the new educational changes. Whether a subject is optional or compulsory, the teacher will always try to be proficient in his/her work regardless of his/her nationality. Thus, the talented teacher has a major role in developing pupils' foreign language competencies.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the latest changes regarding compulsory and optional subjects taught in Romanian and English contemporary schools at primary level. Over the years all Ministers of Education have brought with them innovative ideas to the educational framework in their efforts to contribute to the educational welfare of the children. Therefore, primary education has suffered overwhelming transformations.

In Romania the preparatory grade has been introduced in schools since 2012, this decision bringing a new set of syllabi to the new subjects. The paper will try to examine the new Syllabus for the modern foreign language.

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In 2013 the novelty of the English National Curriculum was the introduction of a foreign language as a compulsory subject both at upper and lower Key Stage 2: 7-11 years, whereas earlier it had been introduced only at upper Key Stage 2. At Key Stage 1 the structure of the English National curriculum does not have a foreign language. In 2014 the English National Curriculum has no change regarding the introduction of a foreign language at Key Stage 1. Yet, it can be studied if the parents choose it as an optional subject offered by the School Curriculum.

Although they are not identical, the two National Curricula discussed above reveal different facets of the education of children at an early age, and most importantly, they contain contemporary trends towards a modern school which has to cope with highly assertive demands from the ones who want to study.

The paper seeks to analyse the programme of study for the new compulsory subject taught in Romanian and English primary education: the modern foreign language. Another central issue is that of adapting to and assimilating the new structures. Teachers need to accommodate and plan new strategies to face the outcomes of the latest decisions. Thus, the paper will try to find solutions for successful language lessons.

## **2. The status of modern foreign languages at primary level – a comparative analysis**

In Romania a modern foreign language was introduced in the preparatory grade as an optional subject in 2012. A year later it became a compulsory subject due to a strong desire of the Romanians to learn a modern foreign language at an early age. Thus, most schools have chosen to teach English as a modern foreign language.

Children can also learn German, French, Spanish, Italian, etc., as a second language at primary level. A lot of Romanian parents want their children to learn English or other modern foreign languages, irrespective of their age, the younger the better. Hence, the Minister of Education has thought of changing the status of modern foreign languages in primary education. Thus, a modern foreign language has been recently introduced into the National Curriculum as a compulsory subject starting with the preparatory grade.

Since optional subjects are only suggested by the Ministry of National Education, for each curriculum area, each teacher sets up his/her lesson plans following the structure of the local curriculum. Schools have the power to decide if a certain optional subject will be taken for a semester, a school year, a curriculum key stage and/or a schooling stage. Making modern foreign languages compulsory starting with the preparatory grade has helped them gain a higher status and a recognized place in the Romanian National Curriculum. In Romania there are schools which offer intensive teaching classes with a modern foreign language as part of the Local Curriculum. State schools which have chosen to teach a modern foreign language more than two times a week starting with the third grade, are very successful, although there are not many. That is why the new private primary schools always offer English, French or German lessons at least twice a week. They are small in number, but they make tremendous efforts to offer high-quality language lessons with a qualified teacher. State schools also offer high-quality language lessons with qualified teachers who are very well trained.

Whereas in Romania modern foreign languages have an important role in the education of children from an early age, starting with an optional course in kindergarten, it appears that English education at Key Stage 1: 5-7 years, is focused on the core subjects: their native language, mathematics and science, together with the foundation subjects: geography, history, physical education, art and design, computing, design and technology and music, according to the Framework Document for Teaching in the school year 2014-2015 (Department for Education, 2013: 7). At Key Stage 1 a foreign language has not been included in the English National Curriculum. However, it has been suggested to be taught by schools as part of the Local Curriculum, as an optional subject (Department for Education, 2011: 70). In England the main modern foreign languages<sup>1</sup> taught in secondary schools are French, German and Spanish.

In a Report written in December 2011 for the National Curriculum Review, the Expert Panel pondered on the following issue:

“The optimum age at which to introduce modern foreign language teaching remains a contested matter that requires careful consideration of evidence; this is not yet fully resolved. Further consultation and analysis of evidence is necessary on the question of modern foreign languages in lower Key Stage 2. However, we do believe because of its importance, that it should be included in the National Curriculum at upper Key Stage 2, which represents a change to the existing arrangements.” (Department for Education, 2011: 25, 71)

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<sup>1</sup> At key stage 2 the subject title is 'foreign language', because they can also learn an ancient language; at key stage 3 it is 'modern foreign language', according to The National Curriculum in England: framework for Key Stages 1 to 4. July 2014.

"In freeing schools from prescription, it is crucial that they are able to rise to the new challenge. There are some risks here, which we have attempted to balance in forming our recommendations", explained the Expert Panel (Department for Education, 2011: 57).

An increasing interest in learning modern foreign languages has made the Expert Panel reconsider their status. We may even expect that in a few years pupils will start studying a second language from the age of 5 because in 2012 a decision was published: "A system in which all primary children learn a foreign language from age seven will give pupils a much stronger foundation, which they can build on in secondary school to become fluent" (Henry, 2012).

The decision to include a foreign language at upper Key Stage 2 in 2011 and at lower Key Stage 2 in 2013 was taken because "the number of children taking a language at GCSE<sup>2</sup> was almost a third higher in 2013 than it was in 2011" (Department for Education, 2014). Therefore, they were sure that younger children would also be interested in studying a foreign language. According to the English Department for Education, the willingness to learn a second language "is forecast to continue to grow, so there is a real need for talented language teachers" (Department for Education, 2014).

### 3. Talented teachers for new beginnings

In our country there is a great number of talented undergraduates and graduates ready to embrace a teaching career. We can say that our educational system is extremely lucky to have intelligent young people who, despite the fact that the income is rather low, they choose to become the future teachers of our schools.

We live in a contemporary world where reforms in education happen so often that teachers, whether they teach at primary, secondary or tertiary level, must adapt very quickly and plan new strategies to be efficient in the new school/academic year. There are specialized training courses intended to help them, but it is the teacher who must help himself/herself to overcome the new demands.

The new 2013 Syllabus for the subject called: "Communication in a Modern Language 1" for the preparatory grade, the first and second grade, approved by a decree enacted by the Minister of Education, suggests that the teachers should use three methodological approaches: nonverbal communication, the ludic approach and learning in context (*Programa școlară pentru disciplina COMUNICARE ÎN LIMBA MODERNA 1*, 2013: 10). The Syllabus has specific competencies for each grade, but the approach is the same. In order to make the pupils understand the new language, the teacher uses a vocabulary appropriate to their age.

The Romanian Syllabus for modern languages contains the following general competencies:

By the end of the second grade all pupils will be able to:

- “- understand simple oral messages
- understand and respond to spoken language
- understand simple written messages
- write simple messages in situations of everyday communication”

(*Programa școlară pentru disciplina COMUNICARE ÎN LIMBA MODERNA 1*, 2013: 3)

By the end of the second grade the pupils will be able to get the partial A1 level of the European Language Portfolio, regardless of the language of study chosen. This new element within the Syllabus focuses on communication competencies, rather than language acquisition, the latter being the basis for competency development. Teachers use all the necessary resources to prepare their pupils for the European Language Passport. The Syllabus allows a flexible teaching approach which leaves room for adaptations to the group of children (*Programa școlară pentru Disciplina COMUNICARE ÎN LIMBA MODERNA*, 2013: 2). Thus, using different methodological approaches each teacher creates his own teaching-learning process.

The Syllabus provides comprehensive coverage of specific competencies and learning activities. However, there is only one language lesson a week. Thus, the language teacher will try to make the pupils understand the new

<sup>2</sup> GCSE (The General Certificate of Secondary Education) is an academic qualification awarded in a specified subject, generally taken in a number of subjects by students aged 14-16 in secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. structures in a very short time. At this level communication has a central role, although in the first three years of school there is merely a basic level of language acquisition. Communicative teachers view language-learning as “a two-way process: *learning the language in order to use it* and *using the language in order to learn it*, i.e. the student must learn the foreign language *by struggling to communicate*. This way, *discourse* becomes both *subject* of and *context* for communicative language learning” (Vizental, 2007: 37).

Classroom management is of extreme importance when teaching to younger children, especially to children in the preparatory grade, because it is their first year in primary school. The transition from kindergarten to school must be made with the utmost care. Teachers create a pleasant environment for their pupils because they will remember every lesson with pleasure if they are successfully integrated into the new world. Pupils in the preparatory grade are not graded, the teaching lessons being very similar to the ones taught in kindergarten. They are required to pay attention to the teacher and to follow the instructions. Song dramatizations, rhymes, games, drawings or stories are the main methods of teaching in the classroom. The teacher is like a stage director assigning each child a role in a story or a song, this way transforming a school lesson into a pleasant activity. Their roles will help them interact with their classmates in a friendly way. They will perform the task with keen interest if they receive instructions with a specific reason. Moreover, young learners will enjoy being in the spotlight. The teacher achieves her goal when the pupils produce the sounds, pronunciation and intonation of the target language. Flashcards and realia also help the language teacher in her effort to get the pupils’ attention. Seeing and drawing the objects they are learning will make them retain faster the new information.

“Schools would be allowed to decide which language, modern or ancient, their pupils should be taught” (Henry, 2012). Therefore, English schools have a modern or ancient foreign language at Key Stage 2.

The English National Curriculum for languages at Key Stage 2 aims to ensure that all pupils:

- “- understand and respond to spoken and written language from a variety of authentic sources
- speak with increasing confidence, fluency and spontaneity, finding ways of communicating what they want to say, including through discussion and asking questions, and continually improving the accuracy of their pronunciation and intonation
- can write at varying length, for different purposes and audiences, using the variety of grammatical structures that they have learnt
- discover and develop an appreciation of a range of writing in the language studied.

Attainment targets:

By the end of each key stage, pupils are expected to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study.” (Department for Education, 2013: 1)

At Key Stage 2 the pupils have the capacity to develop their four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. They are able to extend their capability of expressing oneself orally and in writing. However, it would be better if they started learning a foreign language from an earlier age, according to the Department for Education in England. “From next year it will be compulsory for children to be taught a foreign language from age seven through to age fourteen,” states the spokesman for Education in England (Burns, 2013).

Regardless of their nationality teachers of young learners spend a lot of time to prepare their lessons in detail. Talented teachers are completely dedicated to their pupils’ interests, and most importantly, they motivate them to learn the new language.

#### 4. Conclusions

There are significant differences between the Romanian National Curriculum and the English National Curriculum in terms of studying a foreign language. However, the methods of teaching are very similar, because teachers do everything they can to offer high-quality language lessons despite a great number of rapid changes.

Whether the subjects are optional or compulsory, the teacher will always prepare his/her lessons carefully, he/she will teach professionally and he/she will put the pupils’ needs first. Romanian and English teachers of foreign languages are well prepared in their profession and their countries will always be proud of their work. The Romanian Ministry of National Education and the English Department for Education have all the necessary

documentation regarding the National Curriculum and its changes over the years. Every change was made taking into consideration the educational welfare of the children. “Learning another language is good for young children and it will give them more options in education and work” (Henry, 2012). Modern foreign languages have gained a higher status in both Romania and England, because they are valuable factors of power in and outside the country. Therefore, they are and will always be an important part of the National Curriculum.

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